PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

3. Electoral systems[1]

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

Elections as a central feature of democracy

Schumpeter defines democracy as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. Lipset writes that it is a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office.

There are several common features of these definitions, one of them being competition (competitive struggle, contenders). If you remember the first topic, political system theory, Easton defined political action as the basic unit and institutions are just a specific way these actions are structured. Political power struggles were obviously a part of life in human communities since time beginning. Democratic elections are their institutionalized form. Historically, more often than not, they were violent and unregulated. In democracies they are structured into non-violent and strictly regulated competition.

Defining electoral system

By an electoral system we mean the set of rules that structure how votes are cast at elections for a representative assembly and how these votes are then converted into seats in that assembly. Given a set of votes, an electoral system determines the composition of the parliament (or assembly, council, and so on as the case may be). The electoral system is narrower than what we term electoral regulations, by which we mean the wider set of rules concerning elections. Such rules—concerning, for example, ease of access to the ballot for would-be candidates, the

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right to vote, the fairness of the administration of the election, the transparency of the counting of the votes—are all very important in determining the significance and legitimacy of an election.

How should we convert votes to seats? There is no obvious way to do this for a number of reasons. First of all, for a perfectly proportional representation, we would need one representative for each citizen, which would defeat the purpose of representative democracy, and elections itself. So, we have to accept that convert a high number of votes to a limited number of seats, there will be some distortion. However, this is not our only concern! It may be important to provide representation to different territories of a country, or different groups of people (e.g. certain ethnic communities). Obviously, we want citizens to have meaningful influence over their representation, (e.g. who exactly represents them), we want them to be able to make a clear and educated choice. It is important that they clearly understand the effects and implications of their vote. Finally, we hope to create legislatures that can properly function and make decisions effectively. These considerations are actually quite difficult to reconcile which explains why there are so many different electoral systems in place.

Functions of electoral systems

Electoral systems have numerous, interrelated functions and in different types of systems, some may gain more, or less emphasis:

- Delegating political representation

This is what most people immediately think of when they hear the phrase "elections". We select our representatives by electing them.

- Selecting the political elite

Who exactly, we choose to represent us can have long-term repercussions. Representatives often become integrated into the political elite that has its own culture and mentality. Political scientists sometimes measure demographic variables characterizing the membership of this elite to better understand political processes – just think about how the homogeneity of the elite can affect politics and policy in a country. If all representatives are more or less demographically similar, let's say urban, highly educated and wealthy, how well can they respond to the problems of people living in low-income rural regions?

- Providing legitimacy to those in power

Free and fair elections are a cornerstone of the legitimacy of democratic governments. Questioning the election outcome automatically questions the legitimacy of those in power. This often puts electoral rules into the centre of attention and political debate. However, we must tread carefully! Just because someone disagrees with certain aspects of an electoral system does not

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necessarily provide ground for questioning the legality and the legitimacy of the results. There are certain basic requirements that should be met – rules must be known to

- Exercising control over authorities

We elect both the leaders of the authorities and the opposition responsible for controlling the government and keeping it in check.

- Ensuring political accountability

*Elections are the main way we can enforce **political** accountability: Dissatisfaction with government performance can lead to their dismissal at the elections.*

- Formation of political programs

Elections force contestants to present a comprehensive that cater to voters. Since in democracies, elections are held periodically, this also provides a timeframe from keeping policy promises.

- Reconstructing the public opinion

Ideally, they result in a legislature that in some way represents the political community. This, however, is not necessary achieved by the proportional representation of all the different groups in society with regards to race, gender, ethnicity and such. Instead, they reconstruct the political opinion of the community.

Types of electoral system

The two main types of electoral systems are majoritarian and proportional, although there exist several combinations of the two. The best example of a majoritarian system would probably be the one used in the United Kingdom. The country is divided into single-seat constituencies and in each of those, the candidate with the highest number of votes wins the seat. Some majoritarian systems, like the one used in France, require an absolute majority (more than half of the valid votes) to award a seat and if this was not accomplished by any of the candidates, then another round of voting is held.

Proportional systems on the other hand attempt to distribute seats according to the vote shares of the parties. In most (but not all!) of these systems, citizens can vote for party lists and not candidates – since proportional distribution among independent candidates would often be difficult if not impossible. There are numerous mathematical formulas used to calculate how many seats should be awarded to each party, but proportionality is rarely perfect.

Majoritarian systems emphasize territorial representation and personal accountability of politicians. Generally, they also provide better opportunities for independent candidates to run for office. Proportional systems are better at providing representation for a wider range of political groups and at reconstructing political opinion. They are however

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disadvantaged at creating stable governing majorities because parties often fail to gain the absolute majority of votes.

This may seem like an extreme example, but it is important to note that fully proportional results can be produced by any system – if 100% of the citizens vote for a party that receive 100% of the seats. Proportionality is a mathematical term first and foremost and refers to the difference between the vote share and seat share of parties or candidates.

Literature

Gallagher, M., & Mitchell, P. (2005). Politics of Electoral Systems, The. Oxford University Press.

Questions

1. Why are elections so important in democracies? What is the key term in this relationship?
2. How do we define electoral systems?
3. What is included in the electoral system in the broadest sense?
4. What is the connection between elections and political elites?
5. What does "reconstruction of public opinion" mean?
6. Why do we say that formulating political programs is a function of elections?
7. What are the two main types of electoral systems?
8. Explain the advantages of majoritarian systems!
9. Explain the advantages of proportional systems!
10. Is proportionality the only consideration when it comes to electoral systems?

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